

The Commons and the Puritans.

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persons an oath *ex officio* to answer all interrogatories that shall be put to them, though it be to accuse themselves, and when they have gotten a confession they proceed upon it to punish them with all rigour contrary to the laws of God and of this land, and of all nations of Christendom, except it be in Spain by the Inquisition."

The facts stated in the summary annexed to the petition are sufficiently startling. In 590 livings in Lincolnshire there are only 121 preachers, 455 who are only readers, and 154 who hold double benefices or are non-resident. The character of many of those whose names are pilloried is not edifying. At Lan Leverie in Cornwall, for example, the parson "liveth as a pot companion." At Esey the incumbent is "a common dicer burnt in the hand for felony, and full of all iniquity." Nor is it creditable to the spiritual oversight of the persecutors of the Puritans that according to this summary there were 8,000 out of 10,000 parishes without "preaching ministers."

The abuses complained of in this petition were so glaring that the Commons had already, during the sessions of 1576 and 1580, made them the subject of representations to the queen. Elizabeth, more compliant on these occasions than in 1572, laid the blame on the bishops and promised redress. Redress, however, was not forthcoming in spite of Grindal's efforts to remedy them by encouraging the prophesying, and in 1584-85 the growing cogency of the Puritan demands received emphatic expression in the House of Commons. The majority of the Lower House was Puritan in sympathy, and bitterly resented the arbitrary severity of the High Commission. The Puritan outcry for "a further reformation," and against the coercive methods of the hierarchy, had evidently told on the country. The aggrieved ministers crowded round the entrance to the House plying members with arguments, not merely for toleration, but for a sweeping revolution of Church government on the lines of the "Book of Discipline," written by Mr Travers, and revised by Cartwright. The Commons did not go the length of sanctioning the "Book of Discipline," but they were in favour of limiting the jurisdiction of the bishops by a modified presbyterianism. In spite of official opposition, they discussed various bills dealing with nonconformist grievances and demands, and at length